

The Costs of War

by Elocinn

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Summary: Devestation. Sorrow. Pain. Loss. All are costs that must be faced when war erupts. Now a small series of one-shots based on HTTYD 2. Some AU, some canon. Spoilers from second chapter on.

1. Explosion

****Omg, I wrote something. It's the end of the world! ****

****Anyways, first HTTYD fic. Inspired by a dream and personal headcanon. Based off a shot in the HTTYD 2 trailer. Hiccstrid. It probably sucks but I haven't written fiction in a while...so yeah. ****

****Warning: Character Death****

****I do not own HTTYD, Dreamworks does. ****

****Enjoy! Read and review!****

*** * ***

><p>The Cost of War

His heart hammered against his sore chest. His ears ringed and his eyesight could not pierce the thick cloud around him. No matter how high in the sky he was, Hiccup could find no trace of her. Bodies, alive and dead, human and dragon, littered the beach in a confusing mass of dots surging every which way. The term needle in a haystack came to mind.

"Astrid!" A cough sliced into his shout as debris still floated in his throat.

The explosion had sent everyone into a delirious frenzy as well as

tons of sand and rock into the air. The battle had already started going downhill rapidly for the Hairy Hooligans by then. Not only had Drago's army successfully ensnared any dragon they could with their enormous metal traps but had also introduced some new form of explosives to conquer Berk and the Archipelago.

The dragon riders tried to diffuse as many explosives as they could with as little damage as possible, but with fire breathing dragons, the task proved difficult. The twins and Snotlout already had to fall back while Fishlegs escorted them behind the battle lines. Only Hiccup and Astrid remained, but their luck wore thin.

Hiccup had dabbled into explosives a bit as an inventor but found its power too difficult to control. They found some explosives left abandoned by Drago's men after an assault from Toothless and their instinct was to attack. Hiccup barely realized with horror the ceramic balls were stacked together in a dozen crates before Astrid instructed her Deadly Nadder, Stormfly, to fire.

The fireball that ignited consumed the air around them with the heat of a hundred suns and the force of an earthquake.

They had no time to fly away.

The explosives were filled with shrapnel and Hiccup felt the pieces lodge into his armor, but luckily not pierce his skin due to the thick leather. Toothless did not fare as well and nearly fell from the sky in shock and pain. From what he observed, Hiccup noticed the Night Fury's side seemed slick with open wounds, but the riding gear protected his chest. The dragon shook his head, but proudly continued flying and refused to give in to the mild throbs.

His rider suddenly stiffened. Then twisted and turned in his saddle.

"Astrid?"

The Deadly Nadder and her rider were nowhere to be found. The thick cloud of dust and smoke obscured their view but the familiar beat of wings only came from them. Hiccup urged Toothless forward to where the Viking shield maiden and Stormfly had attacked the enemy's supplies, but found not a trace of blue scales or a red shirt. The young heir of Berk began to feel his breathing accelerate as his stomach twisted. Astrid had to be all right. She always was. She could handle herself, but where in Midgard was she?

A collective uproar below captured his attention. Drago's army broke through the right flank of the Hairy Hooligans and proceeded to storm the iceberg, but not before a masked Valka and her dragon halted their advance with a wall of fire. What caught Hiccup's attention though was a few enemy soldiers veering off to the edge of the battlefield, behind a catapult destroyed in the explosion. Curious about their intentions, Hiccup directed Toothless to follow them and nearly choked when he saw them surround a blur of blue and red.

"Kill 'er."

"G-get away!"

Astrid, only able to stand on her knees and shaking held her arms out against her assailants. Her axe lied several feet away and no knife to save her. Stormfly lied rigid and still behind her. She made one last feeble stand in the only way she knew how, by glaring death in the face.

"Yer life is mine now." A soldier claimed and raised his sword to strike.

"Not if I have anything to say about it!"

Violet blasts rained on the ground around the soldiers and left them scrambling while momentarily blinded. Toothless' signature shrill soon had them cowering.

"Night Fury!"

The dragon swooped down and picked up one of the soldiers before flinging him yards away. The others took that cue to rush back toward their army as violet blasts erupted from behind them.

"You better run!" Hiccup called as Toothless landed where the soldiers just stood.

The heir of Berk stood tall on his dragon with a smirk, finally glad to take some sort of control over the battle.

A heavy breath broke him from his reverie. Remembering his situation, Hiccup quickly leapt off his saddle and turned toward Astrid, only to find her with Stormfly. The shield maiden wrapped her dragon's head into an embrace and buried her face into the blue scales that started turning a dull grey. Her shoulder pads shook and her body language screamed despair. The Nadder remained motionless.

Hiccup swallowed hard and watched the scene for a moment before forcing himself to walk forward. Even before he got too close, he noticed the red streams trailing down Stormfly's side and onto her white underbelly. Several large shards of shrapnel protruded from her chest and her wings donned huge rips. Hiccup hesitated before placing a hand on the Nadder's underbelly and closed his eyes at the touch. The heat that radiated from the dragon's inner fire had gone cold.

Toothless slowly approached and sniffed his dragon companion before a somber expression spread across his face. Turning to his rider, the Night Fury warbled solemnly and bowed his head. Hiccup clenched and unclenched his fists as he turned once again to Astrid. Her body continued to tremble and he heard the sobs she desperately tried to muffle to maintain her resolve, but resolve be damned. She just lost her connection to her dragon, one of the most precious companions in her whole life.

Carefully, Hiccup placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her away from Stormfly. Astrid had no energy to fight him and willingly fell into his embrace. The shrapnel embedded into her arm and side barely compared to the agony of loss raging through her nerves to her very core. Her mind became a whirlwind of blame, regret, and sorrow that began to drown her. Yet, she clung to her sanity and stubbornness to show emotion when her hands clung to Hiccup's armor. The tightness of his hold was the only thing keeping her from falling

to pieces; his warmth the only thing telling her she was not alone.

"Let's get back to my dad." Hiccup whispered softly in her ear.
"We'll come back for her, I promise."

No one understood a dragon rider's bond with his or her dragon more than Hiccup. Astrid refused to leave her dragon dishonored, to rot among the enemy, but Hiccup knew that and he would not allow it either. She felt eternally grateful for that understanding as well as his love.

Sniffling a bit, she pulled back and gave a small nod as she took a deep breath. Calloused fingers wiped away the few tear on her cheeks before grabbing her own and pulling her to Toothless. Yet, she could not help but stare at Stormfly as she climbed onto the saddle, her instincts crying for her to stay. She had no time to consider the feeling before Toothless shot into the air at breakneck speed. Grabbing Hiccup around the waist, she leaned her cheek against his back as another tear slipped unbidden down her face.

The whole way back, they tried to focus on the hands they clasped together and not the terrible costs of war.

2. Promise

Continuing this one-shot as a small collection since these themes fit. I had this idea since I saw HTTYD 2 the first time (seen it thrice). Please don't kill me. I needed to relieve my angst so I made an AU scenario. Hiilikedragons over on tumblr beat me to this but luckily I had a different idea in mind. You should so read her drabble though, its amazing.

Hiccstrid. SPOILERS!

* * *

><p>Promise

"_Hiccup_!"

The shriek echoed in his pounding head as his ears rung from the proximity of the plasma blast. For a second, all he could see behind closed eyelids was a fading purple light. A scramble of thoughts and confusion immobilized him and he shook his head to clear his mind, to remember what just transpired.

"_Hiccup_!"

The voice shrieked again in his memory, familiar but who exactly? Panting reached his ears and it took him a moment to realize he was actually hearing it from something nearby. Shaking his throbbing head again, he glanced up through his auburn bangs.

Toothless stood a few feet away, breathing heavily as if spent, smoke seeping from his mouth. Yet, his eyes, normally docile and innocent, were narrowed into thin slits of black. Unaware of his surroundings, frozen by some invisible force, the Night Fury continued to pant as he stiffly faced the wall of ice in front of him.

Hiccup turned to see what he faced. His heart stopped. Everything came back to him. Drago. The Alpha. Toothless losing control. Being backed into a corner by his best friend. His father crying out. A squwak. A shriek.

"Hiccup!"

Golden hair peeked out from underneath a pile of broken ice, along with crimson fabric and a fur lined boot. It all lied there unnaturally still.

"No..."

The word wisped past his lips. Numbness stilled his brain and lungs, but his body stood and ran on its own accord. Hiccup stumbled on a piece of ice but he kept his balance long enough to skid to a halt beside the figure buried underneath the ice pile.

The dragon rider hoped he was wrong about who he assumed was underneath the ice; he prayed to the gods hoping he was wrong. But, the gods hated him. He had already known that.

Pushing the ice chunks away revealed a limp shieldmaiden, her golden braid frayed, her skin the color of the snow beneath her, her eyes closed.

"A-Astrid..."

Ever so gently, Hiccup placed a shaking hand on her shoulder pad and gingerly rolled her onto her back, her head lolling away from him. He barely registered the sound of someone kneeling beside him and a vast hand being placed on his armored back. All he could do was stare at the damp tunic the shieldmaiden wore, slowly turning into a deeper, darker shade of crimson. The snow beneath her started to match.

"Son."

His father's voice cracked in his ear. Hiccup slowly turned his head, still holding his breath, forest green eyes wide in disbelief. He suddenly realized how close his own father had been to getting hit by Toothless' plasma blast, how it could have been him lying motionless on the snow before him.

Astrid had other plans though, landing Stormfly in Stoick's path to hinder him and jumping off her Nadder's back herself to push Hiccup out of harm's way. To protect her chiefs, both current and future.

She never stood a chance against such raw power.

"Dad?"

Hiccup begged him silently to tell him what he feared hadn't come true; that the girl he loved was still there with him, just joking around like she usually did with him and only him. Astrid was untouchable, fearless. Nothing could harm her nor keep her down. She was the epitome of strength, of resilience. She was supposed to always be a constant presence.

Stoick pressed his lips together, despair clouding his usual valiance. He couldn't hold his son's gaze and instead turned to Valka, who had arrived at his side only moments before. Uncertainty marred her features, but she leaned down nevertheless to listen for the heartbeat of a girl she never met before.

Nothing. No sound, beat nor breath, reached her ear. Valka closed her eyes in defeat, glancing up to her son who still held a glimmer of hope behind the glossy sheen in his eyes. Her heart leapt into her throat to see that hope fade swiftly into grief when she shook her head.

Astrid was gone.

"No..."

The word tore out of Hiccup's throat again, raspy and forced. He shook his head quickly as his breathing grew erratic. He turned back to his shieldmaiden, noticing with dread she had not moved at all. A crimson line of liquid began to spill from her pale, parted lips. Hiccup quickly wiped it away with his thumb as he reached to cup her cheek, an act he grew obsessed with as of late. He couldn't get enough of looking at her face.

A sob ripped from his throat as hot tears finally spilled from his eyes in rivulets. He would never see her smile again, see her eyes shine like sunshine on water, feel a bruise form after a swift punch to his arm. Her laughter, encouragement, battle cries, sighs, and soothing whispers had all been silenced. His rock had sunk to the depths of the ocean.

With a strangled cry, Hiccup scooped Astrid's limp form into his trembling arms, clutching her close to him as a hand cradled her head to his chest. He began to rock back and forth, sobs muffled in her hair.

"We were supposed to get married! Live together! Have a family! See who was the best racer! Add to the map! Grow old together! Why Astrid? Why?"

They promised each other these things on lazy nights and long flights. There was always an unspoken promise, though, one that didn't need mentioning. They vowed to protect each other, no matter the threat or the danger.

As Hiccup squeezed Astrid tighter and placed a last, longing kiss onto her neck, he agonizingly wished he could have returned the favor.

3. Blame

This took an unnecessary amount of time. Bare with me on the first part of this one-shot, it gets better. SPOILERS!

Read and review!

* * *

><p>Blame

After the initial celebration of Hiccup's ascension to the position of chief, the Berkians began to immediately work on rebuilding their ice-incased village. The task proved a lot more dismal and tragic than they expected.

Many did not survive the Bewilderbeast's overwhelming attacks and those who did lost the comfort of home and safety. The spikes of ice had consumed whole houses, obliterating them to mere splinters as well as all their belongings inside. Months of food rations were destroyed and family heirlooms were tarnished into scrap. The years of hard work that went into building the dragon stables, grooming stations, and feeding basins had all gone to waste, merely pieces of debris trapped in frozen, sea-green towers.

The clean-up took a turn for the worst when the dragons began thawing and melting the ice.

They started in the village square, where the Bewilderbeast had struck first and hardest. At first, the ice appeared to have shadowy shapes deep inside, but as more layers melted, the clearer the shapes became.

The younger children were promptly sent away to the still-standing dragon academy once the adults realized what they began to unearth. Not everyone had been able to escape the behemoth's icy breath, especially when the square had been so packed together with people when Drago ordered his Alpha to attack.

Two dozen, maybe even more, were how many they found in the ice towers in the town square alone. All plans to rebuild halted immediately. Finding survivors became the top priority. With the help of hundreds more dragons in their midst, the Berkians tried to melt all the ice they could in places where people would have inhabited, would have been when the Bewilderbeast attacked. By sundown, they had only accomplished half of their goal, but luckily only found a few more victims to add to their losses.

As the fading sun set the clouds ablaze, the village rounded up all the boats they had left to prepare the victims' send offs. The fractured docks could only withstand so much weight, leaving the mourning families to ignite the funeral ships while the rest of the villagers watched from the cliff side to pay their respects. The amount of fires set upon the ocean that night kept Berk bathed in light several hours after darkness finally descended.

It took Hiccup until nearly midnight to give his condolences to the suffering families and friends. This first act as chief wore him down with every visit he made. He kept his lean stature straight, his jaw clenched, but his physical composure could not quell the parasite of his own loss from eating away at his heart. Eyes burning from nearly two days without sleep and mind numbed from all the tragedy he witnessed, the dragon rider trudged his way up to his home.

Toothless remained at his side the entire day, not only to instill his new presence as the alpha of Berk's dragons, but also due to a strong sense of responsibility toward his best friend. Although forgiven, the Night Fury still felt he owed Hiccup the world for what

he had done the day before. The guilt only intensified in his gut the more he watched his home and rider suffer.

The chief's house remained fairly untouched by the battle due to its distance from the rest of the village. Hiccup had been prepared to offer his home to homeless families, but Gobber insisted the Great Hall would suit them just fine. No one else objected, wanting to honor their late chief by leaving his personal belongings untouched.

In a way, the lack of damage the house recieved felt more like a curse than a benefit to Hiccup. He would have to sort through everything and make the home his own.

Sighing heavily, the new chief gingerly opened his front door before scuffling inside. Toothless sauntered toward the stairs, already bidding his rider goodnight with a low rumble. Hiccup paid him no mind, though and kept his head down, avoiding the sight of his now empty home.

Yet, it seemed too bright and warm to be empty.

Glancing up, Hiccup found a silhouetted figure sitting on the bench in front of the burning hearth. When his eyes adjusted to the light, he recognized the golden hair and crimson tunic of his girlfriend, sitting placidly in front of the fire she most likely created. Her fur hood and metal pauldrons lied on the dining table behind her.

Hiccup barely remembered inviting Astrid to stay the night since her home had been one of the worst hit by the Bewilderbeast. She hadn't responded at the time, just maintained a stoic gaze upon what was left of her home before she stiffly went to work.

The same gaze settled upon her face as she stared at the gentle flames before her. Astrid had yet to acknowledge Hiccup, seemingly lost in her own world.

Forgetting what he planned to do once he got home, the chief slowly made his way over to his girlfriend. He undid the straps of his leather gauntlets and set them down next to Astrid's armor as he stepped up to the bench.

"You didn't have to wait up for me." Hiccup started, his voice unnaturally rough from the constant clenching his throat did throughout the day.

"I wanted to." She answered just as roughly. "Besides, I couldn't sleep."

Hiccup ran his fingers along her hair for a moment before stepping over the bench and sitting on the floor in front of her. Astrid opened her legs a bit so he could settle between them and rest his back against the bench and his head on her thigh. She immediately began threading her fingers through his sweat matted, but soft auburn locks.

For a long time, the couple just sat there, occupied with their own thoughts. Astrid continued to massage Hiccup's scalp languidly, causing drowsiness to start seizing him. He closed his eyes and tried

to focus solely on the soothing, delicate fingers calming his nerves, relaxing his tight muscles.

Then, a hand slid to his forehead. A finger lightly began to trace a pattern along his skin, a small semi-circle, then a line. Several times Astrid redrew the image underneath his bangs and Hiccup struggled to make sense of it with his drowsy mind. The lines of the pattern felt familiar.

His nerves and muscles abruptly tightened again. He had completely forgotten about the symbol written in ash on his forehead. So much had happened since Gothi bestowed upon him the chieftom of Berk earlier that morning. The ash probably still lingered on his skin since he forgot to wash it off, though it had probably smeared onto Astrid's finger tip by now.

The silence of the room suddenly felt stifling instead of tranquil to Hiccup. His mind began reflecting on the day, all the destruction, the tears, the fire—he felt his throat clench again. He sat up slightly, his body irritated by stress.

"I don't think I can do this." The chief muttered.

"You've already proven you can today."

Astrid's response was so quick and certain, Hiccup assumed she had been waiting for this conversation all day. She didn't stay awake because she couldn't sleep, but because she knew he would need her. Gratefulness and guilt began to surge violently in his chest.

"I couldn't do anything for those people, Astrid. I couldn't do anything for their families. 'A chief protects his own,' yet I couldn't protect them."

"You can't save everyone, Hiccup." Astrid sighed, still staring at the fire. "You did the best you could by honoring their sacrifices and - "

"Unnecessary sacrifices." Hiccup griped, his guilt beginning to drown him, "If I had just listened to my dad, none of this would have happened. Berk would have been safe. He wouldn't be."

"That's not true!" Astrid disagreed softly.

"It is!" Hiccup turned his head toward her, his brow furrowed as his arms flailed about. "How could it not be? I tried to reason with a madman and, in the process, put Toothless in danger. I don't blame him for what he was forced to do because I was stupid enough to get him into that situation. Then that gave Drago the opening to attack here."

Hiccup gritted his teeth but found no strength to move from his spot on the floor. He took a deep breath before his body deflated in defeat, regret leaking from his essence. He bowed his head, Astrid's fingers slipping to the nape of his neck.

"I did this. I caused all this destruction and pain. I don't deserve to rule these people." Hiccup admitted with a hiss, his eyes beginning to burn.

Astrid remained silent for a long moment and Hiccup began to wonder when she would get up and leave him to deal with his issues alone. He wouldn't blame her. He felt disgusted in himself for failing his people so horribly.

He nearly jumped when he felt her fingers run along his neck gently.

"It's not your fault, Hiccup."

"Astr-"

"It's mine."

The chief froze at that comment. His mouth opened and closed, searching for words, but confusion disabled his voice. Hiccup turned around fully to glance at his girlfriend with a bewildered expression.

Astrid still did not meet his gaze. The flames in the hearth danced across her eyes, but her blue irises appeared dull and distant. Guilt marred her own features, her mouth frowning deeply while her soft skin appeared several shades paler. She suddenly seemed so tired of the world and its madness.

"What are you talking about?" Hiccup rasped.

"If it wasn't for me, none of this would have happened." Astrid explained just above a whisper.

"And how, pray tell, did you screw up more than me? Because I think I did a pretty thorough job."

Hiccup felt slightly relieved to see her blank stare turn into a glare directed at him. Astrid pressed her lips together tightly.

"I'm the one who led Drago to Berk."

Hiccup furrowed his brow again, this time with disbelief.

"I don't understand."

Astrid pulled her hands away from his head and crossed her arms across her chest, folding in on herself.

"After you left Eret's boat, I went to follow you. Your father stopped me and told me to lead the others back to Berk. He and Gobber went after you. After you three didn't show up the next day, I decided to find you with the rest of the riders. We kidnapped Eret and had him lead us to Drago's army. We were ambushed."

Hiccup placed a hand on her knee, a concerned expression on his face.

"Did they hurt you?" He asked apprehensively, already searching her person for abrasions he might have missed.

"No. They paralyzed our dragons though." Astrid answered as she squinted her eyes in anger. "They took us to Drago. We figured out he

didn't capture you, Gobber, andâ€|your father. He was enraged about there being more dragon riders and seemed prepared to kill us. So, I came up with a stupid plan to try to get him to let us go."

The shieldmaiden paused, gripping her biceps tighter.

"I told him there were hundreds of riders on Berk and that they would attack if he didn't let us go. Then I mentioned youâ€|used your name and everything. Told him you rode a Night Fury, were the heir to Berk, were the Dragon Master. That's how he knew who you were when you confronted him, because of me. With this knowledge, he decided to attack your mom's nest immediately and thenâ€|attack Berk."

The absence of Astrid's voice brought on a stifling silence. She turned her head to the side in shame and bit her lip nervously. She didn't want to see her boyfriend's reaction, to see the disgust and disapproval in his face. She felt as if she failed not only Berk, but him as well. She had vowed to protect their home, but she wound up putting it in danger. As her chief, he had every right to accuse her of Berk's destruction and his father's death. She had started the domino effect that led to both.

"So, now you know why he attacked Berk in the first place. I gave him the idea because I got cocky and opened my big mouth." The shieldmaiden sneered.

"It would have happened eventually anyway." Hiccup offered quietly, finally gathering his thoughts. "He already planned on attacking my mother and would have reached Berk eventually."

"He was still preparing for his attack, Hiccup." Astrid informed. "We could have prepared ourselves for him and had a better chance of driving him off, making the losses less. We could have gathered against him at the nest and maybe your dadâ€|wouldn't haveâ€|"

Hiccup shook his head, despite his lurching stomach.

"We would have been slaughtered by both his armada and the Bewilderbeast combined." The chief reasoned, getting up to sit on the bench beside the shieldmaiden who still shyed away from him. "We wouldn't have stood a chance. Our army isn't nearly as big or formidable."

"Toothless still could have challenged the Bewilderbeast and became the alpha of Drago's dragons." She was reaching for straws now. "We could have had all the dragons on our side and won."

"Astrid, enough." Hiccup sighed, exasperated. "It's not your fault. You were trying to protect Berk and the results weren't what you expected."

Astrid turned to him glancing straight into his forest green orbs for the first time that night.

"The same goes for you."

Hiccup opened his mouth, but found himself speechless yet again. He tried to think of something to retort with, but nothing meaningful or witty came to mind. She was right.

Sighing deeply, he reached over and eased one of her hands off her bicep and clasped it tightly in his own. It took a moment, but she eventually squeezed back, the pressure soothing both of their stress.

"I still feel like it's my fault." Astrid mumbled. "I don't see how you're not upset with how stupid I was."

"Because I was just as stupid." Hiccup responded earnestly. "And like I said, you were doing what you thought was best."

"Likewise." Astrid reiterated, making sure he knew his guilt was unfounded as well. "I guess, we're both to blameâ€|"

Hiccup smirked slightly before his expression turned thoughtful again. He wrapped his arms around Astrid's lithe waist and pulled her snugly against him, resting his chin on her head. He felt her own arms encircle his chest and her hands grip his leather armor firmly.

"Whether or not we are, it doesn't really matter anymore. We just have to fix what's been ruined." Hiccup murmured as he buried his face in her hair.

Astrid smiled loosely at how chiefly he sounded. She hoped it was a sign of him starting to accept and move forward. For herself though, she did not feel ready to forgive herself. She still felt responsible for everything that occurred, for the pain her people and her love felt from their losses. She had always been on top of her actions, always in control of her emotions, but cockiness made her slip up. She vowed never to let that happen again, for her village's sake and for her chief's.

"Right. You'll make it right again, like you always do." The shieldmaiden agreed.

Hiccup pulled back a bit to glance down at her. He studied her face pensively for a moment before brushing the backs of his fingers across her cheek.

"_We'll_ make it right again." He corrected softly, a small smile spreading on his lips.

Astrid couldn't help but mimic him. Her lips only spread wider when his mouth descended upon hers. The knots of guilt in their stomachs finally began to come undone as they deepened the kiss, passing their support to one another through touches and groans.

It didn't matter who was to blame. In the end, they would share the burden together.

4. Devotion

AU where Drago interrogates Astrid further about the "Dragon Master" instead of sending her to jump ship with the others.

This...turned out a lot longer than I planned. I was afraid to actually write this since it's such a serious topic, but the idea

_wouldn't leave me alone. _I have such a soft spot for hurt/comfort stories where characters overcome hardships. So please, don't hate me. I'm kinda scared about people's reactions to this. I promise though, this is the darkest I will ever go. Compared to other stories I've read, this is child's play. This series is also about costs of war so these oneshots will focus on some adult themes.

Tell me what you think.

****Warning: Rated T for torture and adult themes. No gore. No sexual assault. Moderate violence.****

* * *

><p>Devotion

The sun's golden luminescence dulled as it neared the brink of the horizon. The winds blew steadily against the cliff side, offering one last gush of warmth before the archipelago descended into a frigid night. Yet, it did not affect the figure sitting rigidly on the cliff's rocky edge. No sunlight, no breeze of warmth could chase away the bitter cold that had settled into her very bones.

Astrid barely acknowledged the sunset, her mind focused on numbing itself from everything around her. The pain in her body started to consume her just a few hours prior and she had yet to be relieved. Her raw wrists pulsed underneath bandages and stung whenever she bent them. Her broken ribs tried to suffocate her by burning every time she breathed. Her head throbbed from the various bruises plastered on her face and skull, but also from the relentless memories and lack of sleep she suffered for the past week.

These abrasions were only some of the worst, however.

The shield maiden trudged to the cliff side alone. Even with her physicality limited due to her injuries, she still managed to take advantage of her stealth to escape the overbearing presence of her mother, the healer, and Stormfly. She just kept walking, no, limping, until her sore legs could no longer sustain her weight. She barely cared about getting back to the village though. She just wanted to get _away_.

Astrid absently rubbed a hand along her bare shoulder to pacify an ache. She closed her eyes, redoubling her efforts to clear her mind and desperately find some relief from the constant pain, from the haunting images of a dark room with chains and stained tools emitting a putrid smell.

Shivering, Astrid crossed her arms and curled into herself. She breathed heavily for a moment, beating away the sight with blankness. Focus on something else. Focus on something else. Combat training. Yes, go through the steps of wielding an axe. How to throw. First, pick a suitable target. A thick tree. Next, feet shoulder width apart, right foot back, on the balls of your feet. Cock your arm back; bend your wrist just so-

Her nerves trembled as she unconsciously flicked her wrist, pain shooting up her arm like poison. Astrid groaned and clutched her arm. A surge of anger rushed into her heart. Growling in frustration and exasperation, she hauled herself to her feet and kicked every pebble

in sight. She broke off tree branches and swung them against the trunks, not caring that jarring her body caused her agony. When her branch broke, she slipped her knife from her boot and stabbed the wood as deep as she could.

"Damn you! Damn you! I hope you burn in Hel!"

When her last stab barely sunk past the tip, Astrid hurled the offending weapon over the cliff. She gasped for air and her entire body shook, but she kept herself standing. Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Clenching her fists, she took a wobbly step toward the edge and glanced down to the boulders below. The sea crashed over them with a roar, engulfing them with foam before pulling back and attacking once again. The water wished to claim them, just as it did with her knife...

"Don't you dare."

The shield maiden stiffened at the hard tone, one she was not used to hearing. The ground slightly vibrated as a large body landed on the ground behind her, followed soon after by a familiar and concerned warble. Slackening her defensive instincts, Astrid turned to the newcomers.

Hiccup stood a few feet away from her, adjusting his prosthetic to its walking stilt. He wore only a tunic and trousers instead of his usual riding leathers, but his disheveled appearance might have meant he had just taken them off before rushing back out to fly again. Her mother probably told him she had escaped and he hastily went looking for her with Toothless.

"Don't I dare what?" She glared tiredly.

"You know what." Hiccup nodded his head toward the cliff. "Besides, even if you do, I'm coming after you."

Astrid's jaw dropped.

"You thought...you thought I was going to _jump_?" She felt her cheeks burn. "You think I'm suicidal? I'm not that crazy, Hiccup! I'm not that desperate!"

Once again, her eyes burned, but no matter how enraged and upset and in pain she was, she would not shed a tear. Hiccup had the audacity to appear shocked and regretful.

"I'm sorry." He murmured, holding his hands out to placate her. "I've been worried about where you've been since I was told you disappeared. I saw you at the edge and it just really... scared me."

Astrid tried desperately to maintain her rage, but his sincere words managed to douse it. She sighed heavily and her shoulders slumped. Closing her eyes, she worked on reorganizing her emotions.

Then she heard dirt shifting right in front of her.

"No don't!" She exclaimed, taking a step back. "Please don't come near me!"

Hiccup froze mid-step an arm's length away from her, his hand stretched out to touch her shoulder. His mouth opened, but he could not find words to say at the sight of his girlfriend shying away from him, her usual proud stance curling into a submissive one. His heart leapt into his throat and he could barely breathe.

What did Drago _do_ to her?

"I just-just want to help Astrid." Hiccup assured gently. "In any way I can. I've wanted to see you all week and I'm sorry I've been so busy rebuilding the village. You needed me and I wasn't there. Well, not anymore. I'm not going anywhere. Please, just tell me how to help."

Astrid remained silent, her back to him. Hiccup swallowed hard and glanced quickly to Toothless, who returned an antsy look.

"I didn't want you to come see me, Hiccup." The shield maiden finally answered so quietly that, if the wind had picked up, he wouldn't have heard her. "I didn't want you to see me like this. I still don't. You can go back to running the village and leave me alone. You-you can't help."

Hiccup suddenly felt faint, but he quickly shook off the feeling as determination filled his core.

"Why, Astrid?" He rasped. "Why can't I help? Why don't you want me around? I love you, Astrid. I hate to see you in pain. I want to help take it away."

"You can't." No tears. No tears allowed.

"Why?" Hiccup stressed his desperation.

Astrid bowed her head and grasped her aching arms, biting her lip hard.

'Because a great man like you doesn't deserve someone as disgraceful, weak, and pathetic as me...'

"Not her."

Drago's gravelly voice halted his men from dragging the dragon riders to the stern of the ship. They all glanced at him, confused. The tyrant rolled his eyes and pointed his spear at the blond-haired, pseudo-leader of the vikings.

"I have more questions to ask this one." Drago sneered. "Take her below deck. Drown the others."

In a flurry of movement, Astrid was hauled away from her group by two men. She thrashed against their hold, but their grip tightened with every movement. She vaguely heard her friends calling out to her, Eret begging Drago to change his mind, but their voices faded as she was tugged down a flight of stairs and into a maze of ominous hallways.

The shield maiden tried to memorize their path, but barely had time to consider an escape plan before she was shoved in a dark room lit only by a small hearth and some candles.

Chains were the first thing she noticed, a pair of shackles hanging from a support beam above. Various tools and weapons lied about on the floor, stained thick with unknown substances and worn from use. The putrid smell emitting from the room nearly made her gag.

The men quickly latched onto her shoulders again as they cut her current bonds. Astrid spun and landed an uppercut to the one on her left, knocking him against the door frame. The other man pulled her to him, but she resisted and twisted around until she grabbed a bludgeon from the floor and swung at his head. He dodged the attack by letting her go, but blocked her exit. The man she punched had recovered enough to unsheathe his sword and point it at her threateningly.

Astrid held her ground, assessing their weaknesses and a possible exit. She lunged for the sword-wielder and knocked the weapon away with a mere swing. Taking advantage of the man's shock, she landed a hit near his ribs. As he doubled over, the other guard grabbed for her, but she evaded him. Tripping him over her feet, he fell forward into the room and out of the way. Astrid smirked as she spun around to the door.

She slammed into another body. One much larger.

"You're a tricky one aren't you?" Drago leered down at her.

Astrid barely raised the bludgeon before the hulk of a man ripped it from her hands. In one swift motion, he slammed its handle against her temple. She barely felt herself hit the floor, stunned by the blow.

"Get up you imbeciles! Strip her of her armor."

Rough hands grabbed her again and held her down the floor. Her senses started to return to her as she felt them cut off the leather straps wrapped around her gloves, rip off her armored skirt, and pull her pauldrons and hood from her shoulders. She felt a tug at her forehead as they pulled away her headband.

'No! That was a gift!'

The room began to stop spinning as they hauled her off her feet and trapped her wrists into the tight, hanging shackles. Her boots just barely touched the floor.

Glancing up with as much of a glare as she could muster, Astrid watched as Drago, silhouetted against the hearth except for the gleam in his eyes, approached her with the bludgeon still in his hand.

"Now, I just have a few questions..."

Hiccup did not move from his spot. Silently, he watched his beloved continue to curl into herself at the cliff's edge, the sunset bathing her in a red glow.

The memories were plaguing her again.

She had not told anyone about what happened on Drago's ship. Any mentioning of the tyrant's name made her flinch. This was not the same Astrid he remembered, whose confidence and strength radiated from her presence. That Astrid had been broken, beaten, and defeated. This Astrid constantly felt ashamed and defensive, even toward him.

He'd be damned if he let her continue to feel this way.

"You can't keep it bottled up, Astrid." Hiccup calmly explained, risking a half step forward. "It's only going to make you feel worse and worse. Showing emotion is one of the bravest things someone can do. It took me a few days, but I finally confided in my mom about...about my dad's death. Astrid, I felt so much better after talking to her. Maybe-"

"I'm not like you, Hiccup."

The nostalgia of that comment silenced him.

"I'm...was a warrior." Astrid shook her head. "We couldn't afford to express ourselves. Your strength is your emotions. Mine...was to be fearless. I've lost that, so now I'm trying to hold on to whatever dignity I have left."

"Astrid..." Hiccup sighed, exasperation seeping through his tone, "you went through something very few people survive. You're standing here, trying to cope and move on. That has to be one of the bravest, strongest, most dignifying things anyone could withstand. What I'm telling you though, is you don't have to deal with this alone. I'm here for you."

She did not answer. Her form remained rigid. Carefully, the chief took a step forward, trying not to disturb the earth. He could just about touch her if he used the full length of his lanky arm.

"Just tell me how to help." He soothed. "Just tell me..."

"TELL ME!"

_A yelp rose in her throat as another lash slashed at her side, tearing open her tunic and skin. Astrid gritted her teeth and clenched her imprisoned hands as she waited for the pain to pass, but the agony wracking her insides plagued her unrelentingly. _

She lost track of her lacerations. Her nose, lip, and cheek spilled blood onto her pale face. The bludgeon left her legs throbbing and some ribs broken. Her hands swelled from hanging above her head for what felt like hours and from the manacles rubbing her wrists raw. The braid she carefully weaved that morning had nearly fallen out from blow after blow to her head. The room began spinning quite a while ago and had yet to stop.

Her body tensed at the sound of a deafening crack beside her before her lower back exploded with pain. Biting her lip, the shield maiden groaned. She grasped onto the chains, arching her back. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried desperately to numb the pain with mere will power.

_"Keeping silent will only worsen your suffering." The gruff voice in

her ear caused her to cringe._

Nine leather strips slid across her shoulder and the shards of glass tied at the ends scratched at her face. Astrid forced her eyes open and scowled at the tyrant standing smug mere inches from her.

"Now, I'm going to ask again." Drago advised. "What are the Dragon Master's weaknesses?"

The shield maiden pressed her lips together, her glare unwavering. Cold, lifeless eyes stared her down, but she refused to give into them.

Drago wrenched the whip back to his side, a shard slicing her jaw. She barely flinched. The hulk stepped closer.

"How did he tame the Night Fury?"

Astrid matched his sneer. She would never tell. She would never betray Hiccup. She already revealed enough due to her arrogance. She refused to endanger him further. Even if she died here, at least he would be safe.

Drago seemed to read her mind as his face twisted with ire. Before she could react, a fist collided with her stomach. All breath left her as her muscles bruised and her broken ribs cracked further. Excruciating pain erupted from her core and nearly choked her as her lungs struggled to regain air. Her nerves inflamed every inch of her, her body convulsing on its own.

Just as she managed to gulp in air, she felt her throbbing stomach sliced open as the whip cracked against her again. She could not contain the shriek that ripped from her burning throat. Tears stung her eyes, but she contained them stubbornly. She would not let this brute see her cry.

"Obviously, you still need some more convincing." Drago growled.

He watched his prisoner writhe against her chains for a moment. Tossing the bloodied whip aside, he strode over to the hearth.

"Your devotion to him won't last much longer." The tyrant's chuckle rumbled across the room. "He won't want anything to do with you once I'm through with you."

Astrid's stiff body suddenly shivered. Hiccup drew back his hand, hesitating. She hissed as she brought her bandaged hands to her head, pressing against her temples. Her breathing grew heavier, her chest shuddering as it tried to adapt to the deeper breaths.

"Astrid?" Hiccup lowered his voice, lacing it with concern.

"I-I don't know what to do, Hiccup." Astrid breathed. "I can't relax. I can't sleep. The pain won't stop. The memories won't stop. I don't know how to make this all stop. I see him all the time. I've always been in control. I've always been able to overcome anything. Now I can't. He took that away from me. I'm not the same person I was and I

hate it! I don't know who I am anymore! I'm so lost!"

The chief swallowed hard. He tapped his fingers against his palms, his hands eager to reach for her. He felt himself suffocating along with the shield maiden. He just wanted to pull her to him, chase away the memories, and make everything all right again. His heart broke seeing her so vulnerable, so conflicted. Her devotion to him had never faltered, even when she was in the throes of darkness and torture. Right now, she needed _his_ undying devotion, despite his rise to chieftdom and his own loss.

No matter how long it took, he would help find her again.

"I know, Astrid." Hiccup lamented, taking one last step toward her and was relieved to see she didn't inch away from him. "What he did was unforgivable and atrocious. I honestlyâ€|wanted to kill him when I saw what he did."

Astrid lifted her head and threw him an alarmed expression, but Hiccup continued as his blood began to boil.

"You of all people did not deserve to suffer that torture. How dare he lay a hand on you? I should've had Toothless blast him as soon as he fell off the Bewilderbeastâ€|"

The chief closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, sighing as he quelled the anger rising like bile in his chest. He met Astrid's gaze, his forest green eyes doleful.

"But I swear to you, I will help find you again, put you back together, no matter how long it will take." Hiccup promised, a hand hovering over her shoulder. "You're still the beautiful, tough Astrid Hofferson I fell in love with and still love. I'll help you realize that again."

The sun might have just set, but Hiccup's world illuminated again when he saw a trace of a smile grace Astrid's lips. Water filled her eyes, still forbidden to slip down her cheeks, but it reflected the pure gratitude in her gaze. She stepped toward him herself until she could slip her arms around his waist. Waiting a moment to see if she would back away, Hiccup finally felt comfortable enough to wrap her in a tight embrace, his hands landing on her shoulder blades.

He didn't expect her to jolt from his arms.

Red, blazing heat radiated from the branding iron Drago held in front of her face, fresh off the hearth. Astrid recognized the symbol. Eret bore it on his breast. Her breathing suddenly quickened involuntarily as the tyrant circled around her.

"_I usually use this only on my dragons, but it has served well as a punishment in the past." Drago informed, his voice behind her. "Maybe this will finally loosen your tongue. Hold her down."_

"_No!"_

_The two guards grasped her around the waist and legs, lifting her feet high enough from the ground. She thrashed against them, but her injuries tired her and they kept her hanging stiff from her shackles. She vaguely felt one of the guards shoving the hem of her shirt to

her neck, revealing her already slashed back to the air. _

"_Let go of me! Stop!"_

Astrid felt a presence at her back, scorching heat sizzling mere inches from her skin. She gave one last, desperate struggle.

"_Hiccupâ€¦!"_

"_You belong to me now."_

Searing agony tore the tears and screams from her control.

"Astrid!"

She tripped as she scrambled backwards, losing her footing and falling off the cliff. Her shocked glance met his before she disappeared.

"Toothless!"

Hiccup barely grabbed onto his dragon's saddle before he leapt off the cliff. The Night Fury flapped once and then folded his wings to plunge swiftly toward Astrid. They had mere seconds until the boulders below. Hiccup reached out, leaning as far forward as he could. Astrid held out her own hand, just catching his fingers. The chief tugged as hard as he could and pulled her into his lap. He clicked the pedal to open Toothless' fin, barely skirting their rocky death before climbing into the air.

Adrenaline pumping, it took Hiccup a moment to notice Astrid clinging to him as his own arm secured her to his chest. Toothless navigated them back to the cliff and the chief stumbled off the dragon's back, dragging Astrid with him. The shield maiden's grip never loosened, her mind lost to another barrage of memories.

Hiccup inspected her, lifting her so he could glance at her back. He wanted to know what caused her to react so violently. He gently pushed aside the neck of her tunic and nearly retched at the sight he saw. Lines puckered her skin, still raw and healing, taking on a shape he remembered too well. Drago's mark. Hiccup bit down onto his fist, stifling a yell of rage.

"Hiccup?"

The small voice instantly cooled his poisonous wrath. The chief turned his attention to the shield maiden lying tiredly against his shoulder, returning from a trip down memory lane. The sight brought back his own flashback, where Drago tossed Astrid at his feet like a rag doll in front of the Sanctuary, where he refused to trade her for Toothless, and finally getting the chance to cradle his girlfriend in his arms after Stormfly tossed the tyrant away. The freshness of her wounds, the coldness of her skin, and the torment in her cobalt eyes still haunted his own mind.

"I'm here, Astrid." He murmured through heavy breaths. "I've got you."

"I know." She whispered, her gaze never leaving his. "I know."

Astrid huddled against him, burying her face against his neck. Her breaths wafted through his senses and relieved some of the tension in his muscles. Though his anger and grief still sat discontented in his heart, Hiccup focused on his love toward the woman in his arms. He tentatively pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, burying his fingers in her hair and squeezing her as close as possible.

Finally safe with him again, Astrid started to feel pieces of her old self return.

5. Respite

Probably my last one-shot for this collection. I'm starting a very demanding and time-consuming job on Monday so I won't have the time (or energy) to write anymore. I am sad about it, but hopefully I can find some time to write here and there. Thank you again to everyone who has read/reviewed my stories!

This occurs between Stoick's death and the funeral scene.

* * *

><p>Respite

Silence permeated the air, once filled with the cries of battle, the clanging of metal, and the guttural roars of thousands of dragons. The army of foreigners, pirates, criminals, and even vikings had taken to the seas again with cheers for a victory meaningless to them. The dragons were dragged away with invisible chains, slaves to an accursed behemoth. Their former sanctuary stood fractured and dull, its magnificent brilliance overshadowed by the thick incoming fog and by the death of its sculptor. Only the waves crashing onto the frozen beach provided a small amount of background noise.

Astrid did not dare to break the forlorn quiet. She tip toed carefully on the beach, feeling as if the world was trapped in a perpetual state of slow motion. Everything that was left behind in the battle lied still. Bodies of hundreds of men and dragons lied strewn around her like a minefield.

She swerved and slalomed past the soldiers, avoiding their pale limbs as well as the red pools that continued to fill around them. Yet, she grazed her fingers along the dulled scales of fallen dragons, their inner heat snuffed out by machines of war built solely to trap and harm them. They had merely protected themselves from a lifetime of servitude and all they received was death in return.

This was what war looked like. This was the first time Astrid had ever actually seen the results of a true battle, of a true power struggle. Berk had seen its fair share of destruction during the dragon and viking war but the casualties remained minimal and armies were not involved. This battle grew to a scale the shield maiden had never witnessed before.

Astrid began to question her ideals, her own lifestyle. Yes, she had eased her aggressive and violent instincts since peace settled over

Berk, but she still enjoyed fighting and practicing with her axe. Looking upon the glassy gazes and torn bodies of the dead around her, she felt sick and unnerved by what violence and fighting could actually do. The pain, the devastation, the horror. Was it worth the power only a tyrant wanted to gain for himself and no one else? She didn't think so.

The shield maiden held her breath as she came upon a familiar shape. A Deadly Nadder, with paled purple and blue scales, lied on its side with its wings still extended. Several arrows jutted from its flank and seemed to have been enough to end its life. Reaching out a shaking hand, Astrid touched its head and stroked along to its beak. Her heart clenched as she imagined Stormfly in the purple Nadder's place. She had helplessly watched her fly off at the command of Drago's Bewilderbeast, unable to do anything to bring her dragon back. She could only hope Stormfly remained unharmed.

Glancing at the arrows, Astrid remembered why she was out on the battlefield in the first place. Gobber requested she round up eight bows and a dozen arrows for the funeral. Their chief's funeral. She agreed without question, willing to help in any way she could to make the preparations as painless as possible for the chief's best friend, for his long-lost wife, and for his son.

The task proved more difficult than she expected. All the bows she found were splintered in two or had a broken string. The soldiers who survived the battle had salvaged the undamaged weapons of their fallen comrades. Yet, Astrid trudged on deeper into no man's land despite the thickening smell of iron and decay. The bows and arrows were integral to giving the chief a proper send-off to Valhalla.

The dreary fog soon surrounded Astrid in a dense haze, limiting her line of sight and complicating her search even further. Five bows hung over her shoulder while she carried one and several arrows rested in her other hand. She knew she was taking too long, but she would not return until she found two more bows.

The carnage seemed to just go on and on. It started to grate on her nerves. She wanted to hear something, anything to fill in the emptiness around her. The shield maiden found herself wishing for the twins incessant arguing, Fishlegs' spouting of dragon facts, and even Snotlout's annoying egotism. Yet, they were far from either her location or finding it just as hard to speak in such a distressing atmosphere.

A snap disrupted her thoughts.

Astrid froze, focusing on her hearing. She tried to peer through the fog, but could only see a few feet in front of her. She quickly regretted wishing for sound. Was one of these soldiers alive after all? Did they see her? She half-expected an arrow to come whizzing at her through the dense haze around her.

A clatter to her left impelled her to drop her arrows, except the one she strung into the bow in her hand. Pulling the string to the corner of her mouth, she side-stepped with caution.

There! A shadow appeared right before her, moving slowly, its hands rose with a bow in handâ€¦

"Don't move again unless you want an arrow through your gut." Astrid threatened, her throat dry from disuse.

The figure stopped, but lowered its hands, standing to its full height—a familiar height.

"Astrid?"

She immediately let down the bow.

"Hiccup?" The shield maiden blanched.

With a few steps closer to her, the figure indeed turned out to be the dragon master himself. His dismal, pallid persona and slumped stature suited the ruin around him. The forest green of his eyes remained trained on the ground, half-lidded and tired. A splintering bow lied limply in his weak hold.

"What are you doing out here?" Astrid breathed as she placed the bows on her shoulder down before walking over to him. "We wanted you to wait by the Eastern shore."

Gobber had taken it upon himself to designate preparation tasks to the other riders since he had more experience with funerals than the rest of them. While he sent her off to find spare bows, he assigned the others to salvage a boat abandoned by Drago's army and carry it to the Eastern shore where they would send off Stoick.

Purposefully, the blacksmith didn't give Hiccup or his mother something to do, knowing their grief for their father and husband, respectively, didn't need to be intensified by the vile images of a war zone.

They all separated without a word and without a glance.

"I couldn't just stand around and do nothing." Hiccup gripped quietly, hand clenching around the bow. "So I came to help you, knowing you'd be out here. I had to—keep myself busy."

"Sorry. We just—" Astrid hesitated, trying to pick her words carefully, "wanted to give you some time alone."

He sighed heavily and tension seemed to tighten his muscles. The Berkian heir, now chief, closed his eyes and furrowed his brow. She was used to seeing him anxious and insecure about his life and himself. She honestly saw it too often. Now, with the loss of his father and his inevitable rise to chiefdom, that doubt would become a constant burden—but only if she let that happen.

"How do I confide in someone I haven't known for more than two days?" Hiccup rasped as his frown deepened. "Yeah, she's my mother, but I barely know her. I almost feel like—"

He shook his head, turning away from the shield maiden. Astrid would have none of it.

"Like what?" She pushed gently. "Don't keep this bottled up. Like what, Hiccup?"

Pursing his lips, the dragon master bore his eyes to her. The sorrow

that glossed over his gaze broke her heart.

"Like she doesn't deserve to miss my dad." He whispered, his mask of mourning twisting into self-hatred. "She left him for twenty years, making him think she had been dead that entire time. She never even came to check up on him. I justâ€¦I don't know anymore."

Hiccup hung his head, shaking it slightly. His breathing started to quicken and grow heavier. Astrid swallowed thickly before reaching out and taking his unoccupied hand. She didn't get a squeeze in return, but she wasn't deterred.

"You think she doesn't really love him?" She asked carefully.

"It's not that." The dragon master sighed. "I just thinkâ€¦he deserved more commitment than she gave him. Yet, now it sounds so hypocritical too, since I would always run from him whenever he brought up becoming chief. Neither of us deserved him."

The hand holding the bow started to tremble as it tightly grasped the handle. Hiccup gritted his teeth together, desperately holding in the tears flooding his eyes. Anguish suddenly plagued his chiseled but soft features. Astrid cupped his face, rubbing his flushing cheeks.

"That's not true, Hiccup." She chided gently. "Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone makes poor choices. Don't forget, he didn't treat you fairly before Toothless. None of us did, myself included. Did that mean we were inherently bad people? Not necessarily. We were misguided, blinded by tradition, but you changed us for the better. You made your father happy again, relieved him of so many troubles. He wanted to fix his connection with you because he always loved you, despite the tension between you too before."

A drop of water slipped onto her hand, but Astrid didn't pause in her ministrations. She leaned a little closer.

"Running away from talks with him doesn't mean you didn't love him enough, Hiccup. It doesn't mean you don't deserve to miss him or grieve for him. You are his son. He is your father. I remember when Dagur kidnapped him, you wouldn't rest until he was brought home safe. If that's not commitment, then I don't know what is."

She chuckled softly and it relieved her to see the corners of his mouth twitch just slightly. Her hands slid up the back of his head, brushing through his thick locks.

"I don't know what to say about your mother, though. That's unfortunately something you two are going to have to work out on your own. But, if it's any consolation, I can tell she loved him and I can also tell she realizes you're hurting more than she ever will. She understands and I know she's going to try to fix her connection with you, just like your dad did."

The silence of the battlefield surrounded them again. The bow in Hiccup's hand slipped from his grip and clattered to the ground. Astrid felt him move before she saw him and stifled a grunt as his arms yanked her to him, encircling her torso with a bruising tightness.

"Iâ€|Gods, Astridâ€|I d-don'tâ€|knowâ€|"

"Then don't say anything." A fleeting smile graced her lips.

The neckline of her tunic dampened as he buried his face against her neck. Astrid pulled up her fur hood over their heads before curling her arms around his head again, pressing him closer. She wanted to bar his view of the battlefield, of all the death and destruction that invaded them like a plague.

A respite in the midst of chaos.

For just a few moments, Astrid wanted Hiccup to forget the world and focus only on them, because she wanted to forget as well. He lost a father and she lost an almost father-in-law. When it became apparent that her and Hiccup's relationship would only get stronger, Stoick nearly welcomed her into the family right away. Just to see them blush, he began calling her his 'future daughter-in-law' and, soon enough, he used the title on a regular basis. Her chief turned into a supporter, a mentor, and a second father to her. Astrid admired him for his loyalty, his dedication, and his tenacity.

Yet, nothing inspired her more than his sacrifice for his son, for her love. She couldn't thank him enough.

With a sudden need for warmth and comfort wracking her core, Astrid slipped a hand from Hiccup's head to his chest plate. Before his numbed brain could respond to her actions, she popped open the buttons holding it closed and undid the buckle. She caught the map as it slipped out from underneath.

"Astrid, whatâ€" "

Her arms slipped underneath the leather to embrace his chest firmly. Her bare arms could feel his natural heat radiating through his sweaty tunic. She could feel his heartbeat beating against his ribs. It came too close to stopping entirely, too close to rendering him as cold and silent as the bodies around them. She would have crumbled in on herself, lost her sanity. She dared not to imagine.

"Gods, I almost lost youâ€|" Astrid breathed shakily, though she didn't mean to confess her thoughts aloud.

Hiccup stiffened in her embrace and she nearly pulled away in embarrassment for her selfishness. She was worrying about her own feelings for him when his father suffered the consequences. Yet, he only tightened his hold on her as she began to move.

He kept silent, but his lips spoke to her enough when they pressed against her jaw and traveled down her neck. Her own anxiety fled as his mouth spread warm assurance through her veins. He was real. He was alive, thanks to his father. Astrid pulled back and her lips caressed his in a languid, sensual kiss that fed and received their relief.

Among the carnage and grief that surrounded them, they managed to find respite and, thanks to his father and her father-in-law, they could do so together.

End
file.